



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

PLENARY REMARKS

Creating a Unified Voice for the Roles of Critical Languages and Global Competitiveness

National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages Annual Conference

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

Madison, WI — April 24, 2009

Good Morning. Thank you, Gilles for the kind introduction and for your leadership on behalf of international education. I also wish to thank the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages and the African Language Teachers Association. Thank you for inviting us to share our vision for making all students world-ready.

Everyone here understands that the cultural and linguistic diversity of our local communities and of the world, presents great opportunities and notable challenges. Despite this diversity, we can speak with one voice when our unified voice advocates for global literacy.

As educational leaders, we are entrusted with preparing students for life in the 21st century. We know that educated children become educated adults, who participate in the social, economic, and civic life of their community and the world. In the 21st century, our high school graduates need rigorous coursework to gain the knowledge and skills to be critical thinkers, problem identifiers and solvers, innovators, and effective communicators. They need to be technologically proficient, globally aware, civically engaged, and financially and economically literate.

In our increasingly interconnected world, American students will continue to be at a competitive disadvantage if they do not possess language and cultural proficiency.

As our world and country changes, as we become interconnected economically and through new technology, as populations shift resulting in more immigrants coming to our shores, speaking their languages in our midst, and practicing their cultures, we increasingly recognize the value and need for global literacy and understanding.

Our students need to be prepared with knowledge of the world, skills to function with and within multiple cultures, and meaningful proficiency in more than one language. Our students' capacity for full participation in today's competitive world will require that they are multilingual.

Across the country, efforts are being made to integrate international perspectives and world language study into the PK-12 curriculum. As state superintendent of public instruction in Wisconsin, I convened an International Education Council in 2003, on which Gilles graciously serves. The council members represent key stakeholders with an interest in our state's capacity to communicate, collaborate, and compete in the world.

(more)

The council has worked to support the development of a curriculum guide for international education. This guide is used by PK-12 teachers to create classroom learning opportunities and is also used by postsecondary faculty as part of the methods courses for prospective teachers. The council instituted workgroups to develop international education standards, advocacy materials, and curriculum and program models to guide teaching and learning.

Our International Education Council advocates intercultural experiences for all citizens. To model this goal, I reached out to three of our collaborating partners abroad. I accompanied educators to Hessen, our sister state in Germany, to participate in our biennial teacher seminar and meet with our German counterparts. In partnership with the University of Wisconsin, we designed a Fulbright-Hayes Group Project Abroad grant to re-trace the Hmong refugee experience in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, a journey experienced by many of our immigrant children. The participants were educators from kindergarten through the university level. I joined them in Hanoi and Bangkok, signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Thai Ministry of Education.

Following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with France, my colleague, Gilles, and all the other teachers of French, encouraged me to pursue regional partnerships. I had the honor of traveling to France, meeting with the recteurs of Bordeaux and Aix-Marseilles, visiting potential sister schools. Through all of these experiences we forged a PK-16 alliance that continues to bear fruit.

International experiences and relationships transformed me, and I saw the transformative potential possible for teachers, students, and communities. That's why the Department of Public Instruction forged successful partnerships with educational agencies in Japan, France, Germany, and Thailand, and we are beginning relationships with our sister state regions in China and Mexico. These partnerships work together across agencies, across grade levels, across disciplines, and across languages to create pathways to global literacy.

I am very proud that in Wisconsin, 54 percent of our students in grades 6-12 are studying world languages. It's good, but not good enough. And, the diversity of languages taught is not representative enough. I know that many of the languages most commonly spoken in the world are the languages that are the least commonly taught in the United States. If we are truly interested in global literacy, we have to incorporate these languages—your languages—in our PK-16 program offerings.

To start moving in that direction, the Department of Public Instruction designed a Critical Language Fellows Project in Arabic and Mandarin Chinese. It is another example of successful PK-16 cooperation, as we are working with Concordia Language Villages in Minnesota, the Center for East Asian Studies, the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and local school districts to develop teaching staff for Chinese and Arabic.

This project, funded by a U.S. Department of Education Foreign Language Assistance Program grant, is training pre-service teachers, supporting the development of new language programs, and providing an avenue for heritage language students to receive credit for their language skills. We could not do this alone. There are many dimensions to building effective and sustainable world language and international education programs. Involving more stakeholders in a collaborative process builds a stronger foundation for success.

In the last two state budgets, I proposed a World Language Program for Elementary Schools and for the 2009-11 state budget, I proposed restoration of funding for American Indian Languages.

My priority as state superintendent has been to promote the growth of effective world language, international education programs, and multicultural proficiency. As I make the transition from my role as state superintendent of public instruction to my new post as president of Nicolet College, I will continue to be a voice for international education, learning languages, and global literacy.

A quality education is one that expands beyond the reaches of one's own experience, beyond the familiar. Every student needs to embark on an educational journey that is infused with global understanding.

Every student needs to think, act, and ask the important questions that globalization requires to develop the integrated, critical thinking that will be required for peace and prosperity in the world.

Think about the passport we give each of our students through what we teach. When we infuse international perspectives throughout our students' educational experience, the knowledge and skills they acquire truly open doors to the world and make connections in their community. We are not creating tourists, but rather explorers who are comfortable with what is usually uncomfortable: entering new cultures and crossing borders both physically and mentally. We live in a very complex world, but our students are learning how their head and heart can think and feel in a different culture. We are giving students access to the world.

As we promote global literacy we need to address issues of equity, identity, and access, challenging ourselves to grapple with the tough questions, like which languages are taught, who is encouraged to learn a language, and how we respond to the loss of tribal or heritage languages. All students, PK-16, deserve access to the benefits of global literacy.

Global literacy is critical to spread democracy. But we must ensure that this means students learn how to embrace diversity, beginning in our own communities, and to work as partners from a global perspective. It is not enough to just learn about others, we must communicate and share with them. Then and only then will we live in peace.

We have so much that connects us globally as educators. When we put children first, regardless of what language we use, we all come out ahead.

Thank you.

###

Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.

NOTE: A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available for download on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/vm-media.html>.